

The King's Choice

By Ruth Finkelstein
for Olomeinu Magazine
Illustrated by Mordechai Zeffren

Once there was a king, "a sage and kindly old king," who had two grown sons. The king loved his two sons equally well, for they were both equally obedient and respectful, and equally good-hearted.

The king was very happy, of course, to have two such equally fine sons. But soon the time came when he was to decide which of his two sons should, someday, succeed him to the throne.

Time passed and still the king could not decide between them. He knew that they would both make equally good kings, but, much as he would have liked, he could not appoint both of them. For no country can have two kings. And he didn't think it was fair to choose the older one just because he was older. He had to find some other way to decide between them.

Finally, he fell upon a plan. "My dear sons," said the king to his two sons whom he had called to him, "the time has come for me to choose one of you as the successor to the throne, so that the chosen one may begin his training in the affairs of the kingdom. In order to be fair about it, I am giving you exactly two weeks to go out and bring back the most indestructible thing you can find. Whichever of you brings back the more indestructible thing will be the future king of this kingdom." With this the king kissed the two princes and wished them success.

The older prince lost no time, setting out on his journey that very same day. He traveled far, stopping in many places, examining everything, and talking to many people. He questioned men, women and children, young and old, scholars and simple folk. Of everyone he asked the same question: What is the most indestructible thing you can think of? And very, very often he got the same answer.

The younger prince, on the other hand, did not leave the palace. He locked himself into his suite and remained there for many hours pondering the question. After which time he came out and went about his life as usual, as if nothing special was on his mind.

Soon two weeks were past and the appointed day for the two princes to appear before their father, the king, arrived. Excitement was everywhere. It seemed as if the whole kingdom was assembled inside and outside the palace, anxious to find out what the princes had brought back and who would become the successor to the throne.

First the older prince stepped forward. "Your Highness," he began, "I have traveled the length and the breadth of this kingdom and I have questioned hundreds of people, wise men and simple folk. Most of them have given me the very same answer.

And here is what I have brought as a result." The prince reached into his pocket, drew out a diamond — the largest diamond he could find — and held it aloft.

He resumed speaking. "It is a brilliantly beautiful diamond, as you see, and very expensive. The diamond is the hardest natural substance known to man and therefore it must be the most indestructible thing that exists. As a matter of fact, even the word diamond, coming from the Greek term *adamas*, means unconquerable." The prince carefully placed the diamond in the king's palm, bowed low, and stepped back.

The king turned around and looked at his advisors, who were lined up in a straight row behind the throne. They were all sadly shaking their heads. Presently one of them approached the king and whispered something into his ear. The king nodded. A chopping block was brought in and the diamond placed on it. A servant then held a sharp chisel to the diamond while another servant hoisted a heavy mallet with both arms and, with a resounding thwack-k!, brought it down on the back of the chisel, splitting the diamond in two.

A murmur ran through the crowd. The king raised his hand, "Let us not pass judgment until we have seen what the second prince has brought." And he motioned to his younger son to step forward.

"Your Highness," said the younger prince stepping up, "I did not travel anywhere nor did I ask anyone. All I did was to lock myself into my suite to give the matter several hours of serious, undisturbed thought. And I have come to the conclusion that the most indestructible thing is to be found under our very feet. It is the very earth we walk on!" With these words the prince drew a handful of earth from his pocket and placed it at the king's feet.

The king looked perplexed and so did all his advisors. Again a murmur ran through the crowd. And again the king raised his hand for silence. "Let us give the young prince a chance to explain."

The audience hushed. "Well," said the young prince, "let us see whether or not earth can be destroyed." He motioned with his hand. Five servants came marching in in a row. They were linked to each other by carrying a container of earth between the first servant and the second, a kettle of fire between the second servant and the third, a bellows between the third servant and the fourth, and a pan of water between the fourth servant and the fifth. A sixth servant, carrying a shovel and dragging a large straw mat, made up the rear. The group halted a short distance from the king and set down their burdens right there between them on the marble floor.

Complete silence filled the great hall. Another wave of the prince's hand. Whereupon the sixth servant placed the straw mat in front of the king and he, together with the first servant, emptied the container of earth onto it. Then they both started stomping and jumping on the earth on the mat with all their strength.

he audience chuckled. "As you see," declared the young prince, "pounding or striking the earth does not destroy it. On the contrary. The harder it is struck, the

stronger it becomes. It becomes so strong, that it can then hold great weights, such as huge buildings."

The prince signaled again. At which the second servant standing near the kettle of fire reached for the shovel, loosened some of the earth on the mat and flung a number of shovelfuls into the fire. Crackle, crackle, crackle, hisss-s-s-s-s-s-s— and the fire was out. "Very interesting," remarked the king. "I wonder why I never thought of that before. Not only does fire not destroy earth because earth will not burn, but earth destroys the fire instead."

The audience applauded until the king raised his hand once more for silence. Now the third servant picked up the bellows and, pumping it vigorously, directed the wind at some of the loosened earth on the mat. Immediately particles of earth were being scattered in every direction. "The wind can tear ship sails to shreds and snap enormous trees," commented the prince, "but it cannot destroy earth. The most it can do is to carry earth particles through the air and then drop them in a different place to become part of and enrich the soil there."

Next, the fourth servant heaved several shovelfuls of earth into the pan of water. With his hands he blended the earth with the water. "It's no- use," smiled the prince, "because the water cannot dissolve the earth. But look!" He pointed with his linger to the fourth servant who with a few deft movements had fashioned a likeness of the king's throne from the earth and water mixture and was holding it aloft.

The crowd was on the verge of exploding into cheers but the prince held up his hand for attention. "One final point, please: What happens if you try to destroy earth by tearing at it or by digging it up with a tool? You have soil in which seeds take root more easily and you get a greener garden in the end." At this point, as planned, the fifth servant handed the prince a beautiful, potted cedar sapling which the young prince promptly presented to the king.

Instantly the king was on his feet, embracing his younger son to the tumultuous cheers of the people. And so the younger prince was proclaimed as the future king of the kingdom.



No, earth can never be destroyed. Try to destroy it and an unexpected benefit results.

Like earth, Am Yisroel (the Jewish nation) can never be destroyed. All through the ages, the blows have fallen, the fires have seared, the winds howled, the waters seeped in, and the instruments of iron have torn at Am Yisroel and dug deeply. Yet, nothing has ever succeeded in destroying us.

On the contrary. The stronger the blows, the stronger Am Yisroel became in upholding the Torah. The fires, or dangers, have seared but never consumed, because Am Yisroel can never be consumed. Instead, Am Yisroel has smothered the fires through teshuvah (repentance) and tefillah (prayer), becoming stronger in emunah in

the process. Whenever a wind, or expulsion, has scattered some of us and dropped us on new soil, we have enriched our new haven. Even the waters of general knowledge could not dissolve Am Yisroel, for where possible we have absorbed that knowledge in the light of Torah and harnessed it for better service of our Creator and the molding of a better Torah personality.

And every time a winter of destruction is over, renewed life springs forth in Am Yisroel, all the greener and the more abundant in Torah.

Because the King of Kings wills it so.

